

Gordon Tullock and the IEA: Bridging the Atlantic

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Gordon Tullock is one of the longest-standing friends of the Institute of Economic Affairs. His first publication for the Institute was *The Vote Motive* (Hobart Paperback 9) in 1976. His most recent is *Government: Whose Obedient Servant?*, written jointly with Arthur Seldon and Gordon Brady (Readings 51), published in 2000 and soon to appear in a US edition produced by the Cato Institute. In between those two, he contributed to several collections of papers published by the Institute and to our journal, *Economic Affairs*. He has also been a regular lecturer at the Institute on a wide range of subjects.

Gordon's contribution to the Institute is, however, better measured by his seminal work in public choice theory and its influence on IEA authors than by the number of papers he has written for us and the lectures he has given to IEA audiences.

When *The Vote Motive* appeared in 1976 it introduced, in the words of Arthur Seldon's Preface '...what is for British economic teaching, political debate, and press discussion virtually a new subject.' It was then almost twenty years after Anthony Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* but, in Britain, most economists still assumed that government is the impartial servant of the public good and that the public good is capable of definition. The research agenda in public choice which by then was being established in the United States did not exist in Britain.

After seeing and publishing *The Vote Motive*, it took Ralph Harris and Arthur Seldon very little time to recognise the significance of this new way of analysing government action. They realised that it undermined the market failure approach to government policy-making, which relied on the assumption that benevolent and far-sighted governments could be relied on to clear up the failings of private markets. After *The Vote Motive*, people in government could no longer reasonably be regarded as different from those in the private sector: government 'servants' could most likely be assumed to be pursuing their own interests, much like private market participants, though not with such benign effects because of the monopoly power of government. For a host of reasons, government action would fail and would have results different from those intended.

These insights represented such a fundamental critique of the conventional case for government action that Harris and Seldon seized on them. In 1978 they organised a conference on *The Economic of Politics* (as public choice is often known in Britain), attended by economists with a wide range of views. Subsequently, they published the proceedings in a book of the same name. The book was for many years the main reference source for British economists who wished to understand the elements of public choice.

Moreover, Gordon's ideas in *The Vote Motive*, followed up by the conference and then developed over the years by the public choice school in the United States, supplied a

much-needed source of inspiration for IEA authors. The Institute's papers had, from the beginning, challenged the idea that government action can always improve on the outcome of a market. But, until *The Vote Motive* came along, IEA authors lacked a clear intellectual basis for their challenges. Gordon's work provided them with that intellectual basis, liberating them from the constraints of mainstream economics. Since *The Vote Motive*, the ideas of the public choice school have permeated IEA papers to such an extent that virtually all of them have those ideas at their core.

We have heard Gordon himself say that *The Vote Motive* did more to spread the ideas of the public choice school than any other single work he (or possibly anyone else) has written. It is a much translated book (at least twelve languages, at the latest count). His writings have had an immense influence not just on IEA authors but also on some of our most prominent supporters. Sir Anthony Jay, for example, co-author of *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* acknowledges (in *A Conversation With Harris and Seldon*, IEA Occasional Paper 116) that the insights of public choice are the underlying theme in those two much-praised television series which are still enjoying large audiences all round the world many years after they were made.

As in other fields of economics, in Gordon's case the Institute was able to act as a transatlantic bridge, bringing the ideas of a leading American economist to a British and then to a wider audience. We owe a great debt to Gordon as someone who has helped shape the ideas of IEA authors for a quarter of a century, laying the intellectual foundation for much of our work. Without his contribution the Institute's reputation and its influence would have been much diminished, and the spread of classical liberal ideas would have been severely constrained.